Report Documentation Page		*Form Approved* *OMB No. 0704-0188*

1. REPORT DATE **2007**	2. REPORT TYPE **final**	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Certain competencies may help offset lack of expertise in senior Air Force jobs**	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S) **Lynn Scott; Stephen Drezner; Rachel Rue; Jesse Reyes**	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **RAND Corporation,1776 Main Street,Santa Monica,CA,90401-3208**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER **RAND/RB-235-AF**
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Captain James Malcom, HQ USAF/A8XP, Room 4D1083, 1070 Air Force Pentagon, Washington, DC, 20330-1070**	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES
Online access|uhttp://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB235/ Summarizes RAND/DB-517-AF: Compensating for incomplete domain knowledge

14. ABSTRACT
This research brief describes the skills senior leaders can leverage to adapt quickly to new working environments.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**1**	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

Certain Competencies May Help Offset Lack of Expertise in Senior Air Force Jobs
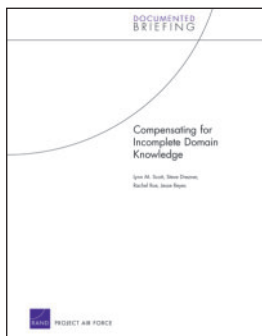
Preparing senior leaders to take charge of an organization as complex as the U.S. Air Force is enormously difficult. Ideally, all senior leaders are fully qualified for their positions, but this is not always possible. The need for multiple areas of expertise, known as *domain knowledge*; the emergence of new weapon systems, technologies, and operating environments; and the constraints of long-term career development strategies frequently cause the Air Force to assign senior leaders to operational and functional domains in which they lack specific experience.

A RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) study shows that Air Force leaders in such positions draw on existing skills—called *compensating competencies*—to become engaged in and begin adding value to their organizations. Four are especially important:

- **Enterprise knowledge** consists of an understanding of how an organization fits into the parent organization and how it relates to its external environment. By providing a strategic orientation to problems and issues, enterprise knowledge enables a leader to develop comprehensive solutions and to learn the organizational processes and relationships that are associated with the domain.

- **Integration skills** are used to create or improve interactions among experts, processes, functions, organizations, and/or capabilities. They improve decisionmaking and learning. They also allow a senior leader to maximize the interaction among subordinate experts, thus enhancing the leader's ability to define problems robustly and to develop solutions.

- **Problem-solving skills** help senior leaders identify the data and information that are central to defining problems and developing comprehensive solutions. The act of using problem-solving skills for domain-specific problems and issues also helps senior leaders gain domain knowledge.

- **People skills** address power relationships between subordinates to create productive information flows. They create an organizational climate that allows people to feel comfortable and empowered to approach senior leaders with problems and to teach these leaders what they need to know.

Because of the broad utility of compensating competencies, the Air Force should take steps to ensure that its education and development programs develop a deep pool of leaders who are proficient in these competencies. Curricula designed around developing organizational analysis techniques, systems-level problem-solving strategies, and communication-analysis skills would be most instrumental to developing compensating competencies. Such an approach would augment the benefits already gained from broadening assignments. In return, the Air Force will have established a hedging strategy for developing leaders and staff members who can cope in a wider variety of organizations and operating domains in the future. ∎

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PROJECT AIR FORCE

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